

W O R D P O W E R

El Poder de la Palabra

POETRY EN RITMO

"Poetry in Rhythm"
Thursday, March 18, 1999

AT THE NEW JERSEY PERFORMING ARTS CENTER

NJPAC
New Jersey PERFORMING ARTS CENTER

NJPAC'S ARTS EDUCATION DEPARTMENT celebrates the art of the written word with a trio of literary events that demonstrate the passion and power of language. We've assembled some of the area's most exciting literary voices — both established authors and emerging new artists — to present their work live and in an intimate setting. Hear words that inspire. Words that challenge. Words that explore the complex landscape of the human spirit.

SERIES CURATOR—NANCY MERCADO

**COME WITH US
AND CELEBRATE THE POWER
OF THE WORD**

NJPAC
New Jersey PERFORMING ARTS CENTER

ARTS EDUCATION DEPARTMENT
PRESENTS

WORD POWER

Thursday, March 18, 1999 • 7pm • NJPAC Banquet Hall

POETRY EN RITMO?

"Poetry in Rhythm"

HOSTED BY

Nancy Mercado

WITH

Nicholasa Mohr

Edwin Torres

Sandra Esteves

Pedro Pietri

Piri Thomas

AND WITH SPECIAL GUEST

Maria Vizcarrondo-DeSoto

hosted by

Ms. Leticia Mercado Pons is currently a faculty member at Boricua College in New York. She is the Founding Director of the Lora Rodriguez de Tito Cultural Institute and Editor of *Long Shot Magazine*. Ms. Mercado's work has been published in *ALoud: Voices from The Nuyorican Poets Café*, *In Defense of Mumia and Identity*, *Lessons from Penguin*. Her play, *AWAY*, was produced in 1997 at NJPAC and is slated for five other productions throughout the U.S. and Puerto Rico. She has appeared on WJAI-FM Radio and on WNYC-TV.

Special Guest

Dr. Patricia Rivera has traveled throughout the U.S. and abroad for the YWCA/USA, and has served as a delegate to the U.N. Decade Conference on Women. She was the Director of the Center for Hispanic Policy, Research and Development at the Department of Community Affairs in Trenton, and was elected in 1993 to the position of the Surrogate of Essex County. In 1996, she became President and CEO of United Way of Essex and West Hudson. A graduate of Kean College, she obtained a Master's Degree in Public Policy and Administration from Columbia University. She resides in Newark with her family.

Nancy Mercado

Jetties Were The Bridges I Crossed

for Solomon, Maria & Javier Mercado

I The Atlantic City Steeplechase Pier
Was the playground I ran in,
Scaled roller coasters as far as my eye could climb
Peered into deep mysterious seas

Sand mounds were the backyard
In which I dreamt,
Converted them to hills of snow
The ocean rolled up to meet

Jetties were the bridges I crossed
Dark-green and black
Majestic beyond their smoky veil of ocean mist

I was often afraid for my father
Who braved them in winter
Sitting at their very edge
Fishing for hours and for years
His solitary tiny figure far off—

The Boardwalk
Was the unfinished hardwood floors of my home
Where I strolled for hours with Mother
Amid giant giraffes and
Clouds of cotton candy overhead

II *(Massachusetts Ave School, USA)*

In Massachusetts Avenue School
My hours were spent
In day dreams of Puerto Rico
Waves rolling up
to my second floor window
In Massachusetts Avenue School
As I gazed at the snowy sidewalk below,
Mr. Grant, my middle-aged white teacher
Bellowed into my ear
Smashing it to pieces
Fourth graders made easy targets

Little brown pegs hobbling
Around concrete school yards
Speaking Spanish to each other

I washed Mr. Grant's blackboards
Thinking this would buy my escape
But, I could not wash away myself
I could not wash away my family

III *(En Mi Casa Toman El Pico)*

The kitchen was the hub
From which all toil
And a splash of ignorance
Generated good memories
For the years to come

Spanish spilled over
Turkey preparations,
Chicharron & platano stuffing
And adobo spices
Brought the bird
Closer to the swine
Puerto Ricans preferred
On such occasions

My brother holed up in his room for hours
Played rock & roll
The lyrics danced inside my brain all night
Iron butterfly
Jimi Hendrix
The Doors
Dance inside me
'Til this day.

Nancy Mercado is the Founding Director of the Lola Rodriguez de Tio Cultural Institute and Editor of *Long Shot Magazine*. Ms. Mercado's work has been published in *ALOUD: Voices from The Nuyorican Poets Café*, *In Defense of Mumia* and *Identity Lessons*. She is currently a faculty member at Boricua College in New York.

Nicholasa Mohr

Nilda (excerpt)

October, 1941

The man lived on East 126th Street and Nilda began to get tired as she thought of the long walk home. It was a warm night and Nilda began to play her sidewalk game. She loved to play the game, especially on different streets where the sidewalks were new to her. It was a game of discovery in which she uncovered many worlds of wonder. The diagonal, horizontal, and vertical cracks in the sidewalks became dividing regions, stimulating her imagination. The different shapes of the worn-out surfaces of concrete and asphalt developed before her eyes into dragons, animals, oceans, and planets of the universe. She continued to look for new and wonderful worlds that lay hidden underneath the concrete.

Nilda was completely absorbed when she saw tiny red dots all about the size of a dime. She bent down to examine the tiny surface and as she touched the dot with her shoe, it spread. It's liquid, like paint or something, she thought. As she walked on, the sidewalk was covered with these dots of shiny liquid leading somewhere. Intrigued, she traced the dots as she would a number picture puzzle, trying to connect them so that she could solve this new mystery. The red dots led Nilda to a doorway and beyond, into a pool of glistening red liquid inside the hallway of a building. 'Ay, ayyyy,' someone moaned. Nilda heard heavy breathing. She went in further and heard the moan again above her. Looking up and into a corner, she saw a man clutching his stomach. His light blue shirt was streaked with crimson and his hands were drenched in blood. His face twisted in pain, he looked at Nilda, his dark eyes pleading for help. Whimpering, he rocked his head, and his black hair, wet with sweat, fell down over his forehead.

Nicholasa Mohr, the recipient of the 1997 Hispanic Heritage Award for Literature, holds an honorary Doctor of Letters from SUNY/Albany Campus. She is the author of many short story collections, novels, plays and essays for children and adults.

A Syllable Toupee

A CHABBA BARRANDA / BARRATO DE NARGA
--- CLABBA TA-PANDO / OSE NEPE TANTO

cube - papa / cube - pepe / cube - nada / tupe - tomba

SOY PARA PARANDA / ZAPATO DE CACA
--- YA TIENE SU FOFO / Y PUMPE DE POLPO

cube - popo / cube - papa / cobe - nopo / no - niño - no

PALO PELIGROSO-O-O-O
MALO Y SELOSO-O-O-O
Y CANTA TAN TONTO-O-O-O
PALO DE POPO...DE MI

...PEE PEE

...PEE PEE

...PAJA-RISI-ME

ME-ME

ME-ME...OYE...(whistle)...

THIS ISSA POLISMIS...who-se? / A SILLY-BLE RISMIS...toupee!
--- CHE MANICA DADA / BARRATO DE NARGA

ube - ro-o / poope-coco / o-o / o-o-o--o

Edwin Torres is a bilingual poet and performance artist. His work combines the textures of poetry with improvisation, sound elements and visual theater. He has appeared on MTV's *Spoken Word Unplugged* and has performed his work at P.S. 122, Lincoln Center and The Museum of Modern Art.

Sandra Esteves

Bluestown Mockingbird Mambo

Autobiography of A Nuyorican

for Lela

Half blue, feet first
she battled into the world.
Hardly surviving the blood cord twice wrapped,
tense around her neck. Hanging.
Womb pressing, pushing,
pulling life from mother's child.
Fragile flesh emerging perfect in blueness,
like the lifeline that sustained her,
yet limp, almost a corpse.

Her mother claims the virgin interceded.
Invoked through divine promise, in prayer,
that caused her dark eyes to open,
her tongue to taste air like fire,
as the blueness faded,
tracing death on the tail of an eclipse.

And as in birth from her darkness,
the free-giving sun inched slow to visibility,
revealing all color and form,
a great teacher, generous and awesome,
silent and reverent, loud and blasphemous,
constant,
sculpting edges of definition
in the shadow and light of multiple universes.

Half blue, feet first
she battled her way.
The world did not want another brown,
another slant-eyed-olive-indian-black-child.
Did not want another rainbow empowered song
added to repertoire in blue,
or azure, or indigo,
or caribbean crystal.
Did not want another mouth to feed,
especially another rock-the-boat poet,
another voice opened wide,
fixed on a global spectrum of defiance.

The meaning of war defined her. Gasping and
innocent,
before she knew her mother,
before she discovered herself, barely alive,
gathering weapons into her being with each
breath that filled her,
growing stronger,
determined
to beat all the odds.

Sandra Esteves, a self-described "Puerto Rican-Dominican-Borikueña-Quisqueyana-Taino-African-American," is an active poetry advocate who has presented literary programs throughout the U.S. for the past 26 years. Her work includes *Contrapunto in the Open Field*, *Yerba Buena*, *Bluestown Mockingbird Mambo* and *Tropical Rain: A Bilingual Downpour*.

telephone booth number 905 1/2

woke up this morning
feeling excellent,
picked up the telephone
dialed the number of
my equal opportunity employer
to inform him I will not
be into work today.
Are you feeling sick?
the boss asked me.
No sir I replied:
I am feeling too good
to report to work today,
if I feel sick tomorrow
I will come in early.

Pedro Pietri is a poet, playwright and the author of the classic *Puerto Rican Obituary*, *Traffic Violations* and *The Masses are Asses*. A member of New Dramatists, his plays have been produced by The Public Theater and The Puerto Rican Traveling Theater.

Piri Thomas

Born Anew at Each A.M.

The street's got its kicks, man,
like a bargain shelf.
In fact, cool-breeze, it's got
love like anywhere else.

Vaya!

It's got lights that shine up the dark
like new.

It sells what you don't need
and never lets you forget
what you blew.

It's got high-powered
salesman who push *mucho* junk,
and hustlers who can swallow you
up in a chunk.

Aha, check it out.

It's got our beautiful children
living in all kinds of hell,
hoping to survive and making it well,
swinging together in misty darkness
with all their love to share

smiling their Christ-like forgiveness
that only a ghetto cross can bear.

Oh, yeah, vaya, check it out!

Hey, the streets got life, man,
like a young tender sun,
and gentleness
like a long awaited dream to come.

Oye, vaya, check it out!

The children are roses,
with nary a thorn.
Forced to feel racist scorn.

Ha, ha, vaya, check it out.

Our children are beauty
with the right to be born.
Born anew at each A.M.
like a child out of twilight
flying towards sunlight
born anew at each A.M.

Punto!

Piri Thomas is one of the first Puerto Rican writers to be published extensively in English and is the author of the best-selling *Down These Mean Streets*. Mr. Thomas's other acclaimed publications include *Savior, Savior Hold My Hand*, *Seven Long Times* and *Stories from El Barrio*.

Patato Valdes (*percussion*) has been nominated twice for the Grammy Award and has performed with Herbie Mann, Tito Puente, Quincy Jones and the Machito Orchestra. He also recorded with Piri Thomas on his poetry CD.

Cucho Martinez (*bass*) has performed with Mongo Santamaria, Johnny Pacheco and Charlie Palmiere.

Enrique Fernandez (*sax/flute*) has performed with Mauricio Bauza's Afro Cuban Orchestra and David Murray. He also recorded with Piri Thomas on his poetry CD.

Maucus Persiani (*piano/key board*) has performed and recorded with Mauricio Bauza's Afro Cuban Orchestra, Defunk, Bobby Watson and Conjunto Libre.

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NEW JERSEY
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ARTS

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Upcoming
WORD POWER
Events

Thursday, April 8 at 7pm

VERSE 4 VERSE

NJPAC Banquet Hall / \$5

Thursday, April 29 at 7pm

**AMERICAN RHYTHMS:
POETRY IN MOTION**

NJPAC Banquet Hall / \$5

